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Mattia Lento

«Basta la mossa!» or Not? Silent Film, Theatre and the Pedagogy of Actors in Italy

Zusammenfassung: Angeregt von einer allgemeinen Wiederbelebung der Forschung über Filmschauspieler möchte mein Text einige wenig beachtete Quellen analysieren und ihren Wert für die Filmwissenschaft erschließen: die Schauspielhandbücher des Stummfilmzeitalters und andere Dokumente, die mit didaktischen Aspekten des Filmschauspiels zu tun haben. Der gewählte Kontext ist Italien. Weil dort die Beziehungen zwischen dem Stummfilm und dem Theater des 19. Jahrhunderts besonders stark waren, wird die Analyse dieser Quellen durch den Vergleich mit der Theaterschauspiel-Didaktik des 19. Jahrhunderts ergänzt.

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Historically, the actor's profession has often been considered disreputable. Apart from a few exceptions, it is only since the end of the 18th century that the social role and the status of actors began to be revaluated in most European countries.¹ In Italy, however, the specific conditions of the theatre delayed this process.² Appreciation of actors increased only from the middle of the 19th century, due to the phenomenon of the *Grande Attore* as well as the incredible popularity of opera singers.³ Both as a cause and a consequence of this revaluation of the performers, handbooks for would-be actors or pedagogical notes written by actors themselves started increasing in number in the 19th century and became especially popular during the second half of the century.⁴ The actors' goal was to be officially recognised as legitimate professionals and

artists. Handbooks and other pedagogical instruments served to demonstrate that the activity of actors was based on the rigor of theory and not only on the tradition of direct apprenticeship on stage.

The same happened in cinema but within a shorter period of time. At the beginning of film history cinematic acting was considered an inartistic activity. But during the 1910s the situation started to change. Many famous and appreciated actors of the theatre started to cooperate with the cinema and, more generally, the importance of the actor in film increased.⁵ At the same time, pedagogical literature on acting flourished, and there are many handbooks, articles and interviews with actors from this period that are addressed to young or aspiring performers. In my paper, I will give a first analysis of this under-examined material and I will try to verify its links to the earlier pedagogical literature aimed at theatrical actors.

The first inspiration for my article came from reading a satirical Italian poem written by Trilussa⁶, a popular poet of the 20th century who wrote in Roman dialect. «Basta la mossa!» («Moving is enough!») is the title of this humorous and surrealistic text. It tells the story of a monkey that goes to a photographer because it wants to become a silent film actor. For this purpose, the photographer proposes a screen-test to the animal who accepts. The monkey simply makes a few grimaces and scratches its belly in front of the camera and that is enough to obtain the photographer's approval:

Brava! – strillò er fotografo – Benone!
Questo pe' fa' carierà basta e avanza:
sei nata proprio co' la vocazione!
Se allarghi mejo certi movimenti
Chissà che artista celebre diventi!

Bravo! – The photographer shouted – Very good!
This is fair enough to make your career
You were born with a vocation!
If you stress some moves
Goodness knows how famous you will get!⁷

1 Cf. Petrini, Sandra: *L'arte dell'attore dal Romanticismo a Brecht*. Roma: Laterza 2009, p. 64.

2 On 19th century theatre in Italy see Meldolesi, Claudio; Taviani, Ferdinando: *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Ottocento*. Roma: Laterza 2010; Alonge, Roberto: *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Ottocento*. Roma: Laterza 2004.

3 *Grande Attore* is an Italian expression referring to a small group of extremely popular 19th century actors with great charisma and an extraordinary ability on stage. See e.g. Livio, Gigi: *La scena italiana: materiali per una storia dello spettacolo dell'Otto e Novecento*. Milano: Mursia 1989.

4 Cf. Petrini: *L'arte dell'attore*, pp. 64–90.

5 Cf. Lento, Mattia: «Spalle al pubblico: Lyda Borelli tra cinema e teatro». In: *Bianco e Nero* vol. 71, 2011, no. 586, pp. 109–116.

6 Carlo Alberto Salustri (1871–1950) is the poet's real name and the pseudonym Trilussa is an anagram of his surname.

7 Trilussa: *Tutte le poesie*. Milano: A. Mondadori 2004, p. 24. All translations from Italian are mine. This poem could also be read as an act of revenge against Leda Gys, Trilussa's former fiancée who abandoned the poet for a film producer and became a film star.

The poem was written in 1916, a golden age for Italian film actors. During this period, the star system was established and many Italian silent film actors were appreciated by the middle class audience. Moreover, some intellectuals started to consider film acting as an artistic activity. «Basta la mossa!» testifies to the remaining prejudices about the lack of artistry in silent film performance.⁸

It is in the context of these prejudices that, according to Cristina Jandelli, the pedagogical literature addressed to would-be actors or film fans flourished.⁹ This literature wants to give the impression that, like stage acting, film acting is based on a professional method instead of just improvisation and unprofessionalism. It also shows the numerous skills demanded of the actors in spite of the absence of voice and the presence of the technological apparatus.

As I mentioned before, the same phenomenon occurred in 19th century Italian theatre. The number of handbooks, essays and articles on stage acting written during this period is impressive. Italian theatre historians have been examining this evidence for a long time and we have a plethora of studies on it.¹⁰ Their analyses shed light on several important aspects of 19th century theatre:

1. The pedagogical institutions (methods, approaches, rules, schools...)
2. A sociology of actors
3. Rules, clichés and prescriptions on acting style
4. Theories of acting and passions
5. Other issues related to the aesthetics and organisation of spectacle

In the next part of my article, I will consider pedagogical writings on cinema with the aim of delineating the first four points mentioned above in relation to silent film and, at the same time, I will try to compare the results of my analysis with those found by historians of theatre.

8 We might also mention *I quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* [*The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*], a novel written by Luigi Pirandello in 1915, as a negative critique of film actors, although this is a different case than «Basta la mossa!». On the relationship between 1910s fictional literature and cinema see Gambacorti, Irene: «Lo schermo di carta: letteratura sul cinema negli anni Dieci». In: *Lo schermo di carta: pagine sul cinema 1906–1924* (to be published). An extremely critical article on Italian film actors is Vassallo, Orlando: «Sugli attori cinematografici». In: *Cine-fono* vol. 6, 1914, no. 279, pp. 39–40.

9 Jandelli, Cristina: «La tecnica nella recitazione cinematografica: il caso Paolo Azzurri». In: *Bianco e Nero* vol. 63, 2004, no. 549, pp. 47–48.

10 See Oliva, Gaetano: *La letteratura teatrale italiana e l'arte dell'attore (1860–1890)*. Novara: De Agostini 2007, pp. 197–322. Also, the Università degli Studi di Napoli has created an important online archive dedicated to the study of acting, see <http://www.actingsarchives.it/>.

Pedagogical institutions

Pedagogy in the silent film era is an underexamined area in film scholarship and there are not many studies dedicated to this aspect.¹¹ In any case, it can be argued that pedagogical institutions in Italian silent film show many resemblances with those of 19th century Italian theatre. First of all, the most important tools in both traditions were certainly the didactic handbooks.¹² They were often written by actors who directed acting courses or schools, and it is possible to deduce the methods of these schools or the ideas and approaches of their teachers from the texts. For example, according to these books, actors should acquire a general knowledge on literature, history, history of art and aesthetics, and many pages are dedicated to these disciplines. Some of these handbooks feature partly identical content and there are some cases of partial plagiarism.¹³ The handbooks are not the only pedagogical instruments addressed to theatrical and cinematic artists. In many cases, memoirs, essays, interviews and articles by famous actors also have a fundamentally pedagogical function.¹⁴ I call these indirect pedagogy.

Regarding the differences between theatre and film, it is easy to observe the minor professionalism of cinematic pedagogues and the lower authoritativeness of cinematic teachings which were carried out in improvised settings rather than academies. Furthermore, the most famous theatrical actors gave

11 Cf. Jandelli: «La tecnica nella recitazione», pp. 47–66; and partially Pitassio, Francesco: «Le illustri attrici, gli illustri attori. Considerazioni sulla recitazione nel cinema muto italiano» (to be published). This essay provided much useful information for my research. I want to thank Francesco Pitassio for sending me the text before its publication and for his generous suggestions on film acting.

12 Regarding cinema, I consulted the following handbooks during my research at Biblioteca Mario Gromo (Museo Nazionale del Cinema): Azzurri, Paolo: *Come si possa diventare artisti cinematografici. Manuale teorico-pratico*. Firenze: Scuola Cinematografica Azzurri 1917 [revised edition of writings published in the journal Teatro ed arte in 1915]; Azzurri, Paolo: *Come si possa diventare artisti cinematografici. Manuale teorico-pratico*. Firenze: Scuola Cinematografica Azzurri 1926 [revised edition]; Scocco, Giovanni: *L'arte silenziosa: l'espressione dei sentimenti portati al cinematografo*. Roma: Luzzati 1918; Galasso, Rino; Simonetti, Olindo: *Per diventare attori cinematografici. Manuale teorico-pratico per gli aspiranti dell'arte muta*. Trieste: Paolo Fichera 1923 [partial plagiarism of Azzurri's handbook published in 1917]; Guerzoni, Giuseppe: *Cine-scuola epistolare illustrata. Arte, industria, commercio cinematografico*. Milano: Edizioni della Cinegrafica 1928; Battista, Beniamino: *Come si diventa artisti cinematografici*. Napoli: Cine-Ars 1931. Furthermore, I consulted a handbook for screenwriters which also contained important indications on film acting: Chiosso, Renzo: *Corso per formarsi autore cinematografico*. Roma: Scuole Riunite 1927.

13 Cf. Jandelli: «La tecnica nella recitazione», pp. 47–66.

14 Cf. Molinari, Claudio: «Teorie della recitazione: gli attori sull'attore. Da Rossi a Zacconi». In: Ferrone, Siro (ed.): *Teatro dell'Italia Unita, Atti dei convegni* (Firenze, 10–11 dicembre 1977; 4–6 novembre 1978). Milano: Il Saggiatore 1980, pp. 75–97.

their (indirect) contributions to pedagogy in the form of books or memoirs, while film actors preferred articles or interviews published in Italian film journals.¹⁵ In this context, it is also possible to find articles on film acting addressed to young artists as well as advertisements for film acting schools and private lessons. Angelo Piero Berton, for example, attempted to describe the nature of film acting in a series of pieces. These articles appeared first in the journal *Il maggese cinematografico* in 1913 before they were published in extended form in the journal *La vita cinematografica* between the months of June and October 1914.¹⁶ In 1913, *Il maggese* also contained many advertisements by Serafina Lanzi, an unknown actress who offered private lessons at home to ameliorate the art of addressing, the expressivity of the face without damaging its beauty and the art of make-up. Regarding pedagogy in journals, the first results of my inquiries are interesting, but research is yet to be completed.

A sociology of actors

Paolo Azzurri's handbook *Come si possa diventare artisti cinematografici*, published in 1917 and then revised in 1926, is a good example of the value of pedagogical literature for reconstructing the biography, social status, mentality, career and training of film actors.¹⁷ In the second and, more deeply, in the third edition of his handbook, Paolo Azzurri (a minor actor and director of films) refers to his biography with accounts of his education as an actor in a small operetta ensemble, his choice to become a film actor and his impressions of the first part of his career with the society Ambrosio in Turin. In the foreword to his handbooks, Azzurri defends film actors and claims that film acting is an art. Like Trilussa and many others, he didn't think that being a good actor in film would be difficult at first: «[I] had considered this art extremely effortless and I had supposed that four grimaces would have been enough to be a good actor.»¹⁸ He only came to understand the peculiarities of film acting and the differences to acting in the theatre after having shot his first movie. Azzurri

also gives us an idea about the creative role of actors in film. In a chapter dedicated to memorisation, he refers to the impossibility for film actors to read a scenario before shooting. The reason for this is simple: fear of plagiarism. Film actors must thus have both good memory and the ability to improvise. In fact, they did not receive many instructions from directors (or *direttori di scena*) who were mostly untrained, improvising *metteur en scène*. Yet, in spite of the director's lack of professionalism, film actors must obey him or her according to Azzurri.

The guiding role of film directors and their increasing professionalism seems to emerge in later handbooks, for example in Rino Galasso and Olindo Simonetti's *Per diventare attori cinematografici. Manuale teorico-pratico per gli aspiranti dell'arte muta*, a partial plagiarism of Azzurri's work, and in Beniamino Battista's last handbook entitled *Come si diventa artisti cinematografici*, which was published at the end of Italian silent film era. According to these works, the directors are the only people who have the technical and artistic competence to lead the entire troupe and their authority seems to have increased to the detriment of the actors' independence.

Acting style

Handbooks, essays and memoirs from 19th century Italian theatre sometimes appear to contradict other evidence such as contemporary reviews or pictures. They often present a sort of acting style grammar that seems too rigid to illustrate the art of single performers, and they are addressed to non-professional actors. Nevertheless, these sources are certainly useful for reconstructing stylistic theatrical stereotypes. This is the case with Alamanno Morelli's famous handbook, a sort of dictionary of passions combined with specific bodily poses and gestures.¹⁹

Silent film historians are luckier than teatrologists in that they can sometimes refer directly to performance for stylistic analyses of acting. Pedagogical evidence related to film can be used to chase the sources and the reasons for some stylistic options. They are also useful for reconstructing a sort of ideal actor. At this stage of my research, the ideal actor assumed by the manuals is generally inclined to a generic and sometimes contradictory naturalness, slow-

15 Cf. Bertini, Francesca: «Dell'interpretazione. L'arte e gli attori nel cinematografo. Parla Francesca Bertini». In: *L'Arte muta* vol. 1, 1916, no. 1; Borelli, Lyda: «La cinematografia moderna». In: *Il Tempo* vol. 1, 1914, no. 59; Borelli, Lyda: «Bellezza ed eleganza». In: *L'Arte muta* vol. 1, 1916 no. 6–7. These articles are published in Jandelli, Cristina: *Le dive italiane del cinema muto*. Palermo: L'EPOS 2006.

16 On this interesting personality of Italian silent cinema see Grifo, Marco: «Angelo Piero Berton: cinefilo appassionato, cineasta mancato»: In: *Immagine – Note di Storia del Cinema* vol. 10/11, 2006, no. 20, pp. 72–76.

17 Jandelli: «La tecnica nella recitazione», pp. 47–66.

18 Azzurri (1917): *Come si possa diventare*, p. 10.

19 Morelli, Alamanno: *Prontuario delle pose sceniche*. Milano: Bonomi e Scotti 1854. This handbook was in part influenced by Johann Jacob Engel's *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (1775–1778), translated into Italian in 1818. Engel's work played a fundamental role in the Italian pedagogy and theory of acting during the 19th century.

ness of gestures, statuesque and pictorial poses, facial mobility and a kind of acting based on dramatic situations or the representation of passions rather than the definition of character.²⁰ In some cases, film actors are supposed to have abilities of self-direction as well: they have to control their position in relation to other actors and they have to pay attention to their exposure to light.²¹ Moreover, the ideal actor should be athletic, be able to care for his/her make-up and be able to die in a proper way (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: The importance of statuesque iconography in defining the acting style in Guerzoni's handbook

Theories of acting and passion

The theories of acting lead me to the central argument of my paper where I try to show how the connection between the theatrical and cinematic traditions was particularly significant. The second half of the 19th century is a golden age for theatrical actors in Italy. The generation of the so-called *Grande Attore* had a great impact on theatre. Ernesto Rossi, Adelaide Ristori and Tommaso Salvini were very successful on stage, and not only in Italy. They could delight foreign audiences with their body language and charisma. They knew perfectly how to provoke an emotional response from the audience. Their technique of addressing the spectators was considered perfect. Yet, despite their technical skill, they were not considered cold or «diderotienne»²² perfor-

mers – on the contrary, they were perceived as passionate actors embodying and living their stage roles. This equilibrium between head and heart, technique and feelings, is in fact typical of the theatre of the entire century and is reflected in the pedagogical literature. The pedagogues delineated a passionate and creative actor, but, at the same time, they proposed a rigid codification of feelings and associated gestures (as well as the use of voice, facial expressions etc.). The emotionalism of their idea seemed to be in conflict with this rigid codification.²³

The film pedagogues repeatedly declared the specific nature of film acting as opposed to stage acting. Azzurri and others understood, for example, the specificity of facial acting in film (fig. 2).²⁴ For Cristina Jandelli, Azzurri's conception of film acting was not far from Walter Benjamin's idea of film acting as a series of optical tests which the actor must undergo.²⁵ Jandelli's comparison seems to be a bit hasty, but Azzurri and the other film pedagogues were certainly conscious of the peculiarity of acting in front of a camera and with varying shooting distance. Nevertheless, it is the thesis of the last part of my article that the film pedagogues again basically proposed both an emotionalist model and a rigid codification of expressivity borrowed from the earlier theatrical pedagogues. In fact, despite the obvious differences, film pedagogy looked back to 19th century theatre for its theories of acting, and the actor resulting from this theorisation is a confusing mix of passionateness and adherence to codes.

The emotionalist theory is the principle approach of Simonetti and Galasso's handbook. In a chapter dedicated to the psyche and the cinematograph, the language and pedagogic topoi closely follow those of theatrical pedagogues. They suggest to actors a deep study of their interiority; they talk about spontaneity, creativity and *sacro fuoco* (holy fire) as a basis for film acting; they declare that «all the passions, except the most shameful, should be experienced by actors. [...] It is demonstrated that the most communicable passions are those which are experienced.»²⁶ At the same time, they propose a some-

without sensibility.

23 On the birth of emotionalism theory in Western society see Vicentini, Claudio: «Da Platone a Plutarco. L'emozionismo nella teoria della recitazione del mondo antico». 2005. <http://www.drammaturgia.it/saggi/saggio.php?id=2039> (1/6/2012). Claudio Vicentini is one of the most influential Italian historians of theatrical acting and he wrote many crucial essays on this subject.

24 The handbooks always contain exercises for training the facial muscles, see fig. 2.

25 Cf. Jandelli: «La tecnica nella recitazione», p. 53.

26 Galasso et al.: *Per diventare attori cinematografici*, p. 66.

20 This is a typical characteristic of Alamanno Morelli's handbook and of many others published during that period. Cf. Oliva: *La letteratura teatrale italiana*, p. 269.

21 Cf. Guerzoni: *Cine-scuola illustrata*, pp. 188–190.

22 In his essay *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, one of the most significant statements on acting in the Western world, Denis Diderot argued that great actors must possess judgment and penetration

what naive codification of facial expressions and accompanying exercises. The model for this is Azzurri's handbook. In addition to the representation of individual feelings they also suggest exercises to improve the efficient and proper changing of facial expressions. These exercises are based on improbable dramatic situations. In one example, the aspiring actor should stand in front of a mirror and imagine being joyful in a group of happy acquaintances, hearing a friend who tells a funny story, remembering his dead mother and, at the end, seeing both his child and his wife. Every single event of this series should provoke a different feeling (joy, fun, sadness and, again, joy), and every feeling should be depicted by a different facial expression (fig. 3–5). The method might not be very efficient, but the exercise shows the pedagogues' awareness of the difficulty of changing expressions in film acting, particularly in close-ups. There are many examples in silent film where actors cannot properly deal with long takes in close-up and changes of facial expressions.²⁷ The low cutting rate certainly stimulated the actors' creativity, but sometimes it constituted considerable difficulties.

Another Italian pedagogue, Giuseppe Guerzoni, promoted the idea of an actor capable of ignoring his own personality in order to embrace the passions of his character. First, the actor has to coldly analyse the psychological situation he is going to play, and then the qualities of his type. After the study of his own character, the actor should start a not well-specified process of «self suggestion», which leads to the shaping of «an artificial soul.»²⁸

Guerzoni, with his mixture of emotionalism and coldness, proposes a sort of incomplete Stanislavski method, incomplete because he did not fully develop the fundamental concept of emotive memory. Guerzoni's manual is certainly the most interesting and serious, a precious document in the history of silent cinema. However, the author does not abandon the rigid codification of expressivity. The facial exercises are accompanied by both graphic representations and photos. Rather unusually, the handbook also contains many pictures of Italian film performers of the 1910s. This leads me to my final point which is also a criticism of pedagogy in Italian Early Cinema. Despite the great importance of some remarks on the nature of film acting and the

historical value of their works, Italian pedagogues of film acting were more normative than descriptive in their theory. Their consciousness of the specific nature of film acting was not accompanied by a renewed theoretical horizon. Nevertheless, their works show how early and silent cinema tried to shape its own identity under the influence of other arts.



Fig. 2: Azzurri's visualisation of his muscle exercises, aimed at improving the mobility of facial expressions

27 In a sequence of *MA L'AMOR MIO NON MUORE!* (I 1913), Lyda Borelli's debut film, the star clearly has difficulties in dealing with a long take in close-up, in particular with changing facial expressions. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, however, have a different opinion on Borelli's performance. They analyse this sequence in Brewster, Ben; Jacobs, Lea: *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997, pp. 114–116.

28 Cf. Guerzoni: *Cine-scuola illustrata*, p. 108.

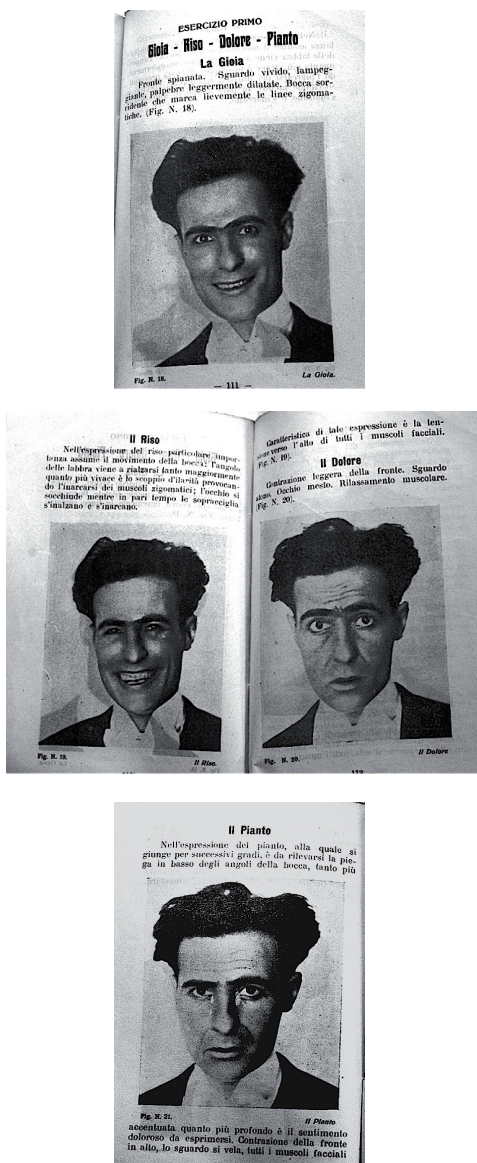


Fig. 3-5: The exercise from Galasso and Simonetti's handbook